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Evidence & Policy: Developing the interdisciplinary field of knowledge use - Editorial for submission by 15.03.18 (Kat Smith & Mark Pearson)

As incoming Editors-in-Chief, we are delighted to have the chance to welcome you to this exciting new issue of *Evidence & Policy*. We want, first of all, to acknowledge the fantastic work of outgoing editors, Professors David Gough and Annette Boaz (the latter of whom is continuing to guide us through the editorial process for this issue) as well as the ongoing work and support of the journal's experienced Editorial Officer, Sylvia Potter. We also want to acknowledge and thank the Associate Editors, all of whom do a huge amount of work assessing papers, finding willing reviewers and guiding potential authors through our review processes, plus the many reviewers that take the time to constructively engage with submissions. *Evidence & Policy* would not exist without all of this behind-the-scenes work.

Before we say anything about our future vision for this journal, we also wanted to briefly reflect on its origins and development. *Evidence & Policy* first launched in 2005, emerging out of the UK's Centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. As such, the birth of the journal reflected the growing funder interest in the impact of academic research on the wider worlds of policy and practice. The journal has always been an international, interdisciplinary journal devoted to studying, discussing and improving the relationship between research and decision making.

From the start, the intended audience was unusually broad for an academic journal, encompassing policy makers, teachers and practitioners as well as researchers. Reflecting these diverse audiences, the journal incorporates three distinct types of paper: traditional research papers, debate pieces and practice pieces, as well as the ever-useful 'sources and resources' overview, intended to help keep us all up to speed with relevant publications and conferences. Living up to its interdisciplinary intentions, the journal has provided a platform for articles focusing on a wide range of social and public policy issues, including criminal justice, international development, education, the environment, social care and health, among others.

Looking forward, our vision is for *Evidence & Policy* to be the international 'go-to' journal for academics, policymakers and practitioners from any field who want to know how to

improve the use of knowledge in policy and practice or who are engaged in critical or innovative scholarship on this topic. A key part of this involves developing this area as an interdisciplinary field and supporting those who are developing research and practice careers in this area. As such, we hope the journal will be more involved in supporting dialogue on this topic across a range of platforms; traditional written communication will of course remain central but we are keen for the journal to continue to be a growing presence on social media, as well as at relevant events and conferences. In September 2018, for example, the journal will take a leading role in an interdisciplinary conference on evidence and policy that is being organised by outgoing Editor-in-Chief, Annette Boaz, and ongoing Associate Editor, Kathryn Oliver. And later this year, we will be featuring the Africa Evidence Network's biennial conference, providing an overview of the work of the Africa Evidence Leadership Award Winner.

We are also particularly keen to re-emphasise the potential for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning. It has been a common reflection in Editorial discussions that, while the journal has managed to attract contributions from a wide range of research and policy areas, there remains a tendency to receive submissions that report on developments, issues or initiatives within specific fields, rather than comparing across fields or, even more ambitiously, learning from trans/interdisciplinary research and practice. We are particularly conscious, as researchers who have focused on health issues ourselves, that assessments of knowledge exchange initiatives and studies relating to health issues have been particularly popular (as, indeed, is the case for this issue). These tendencies reflect the funding, research and policy landscapes and, as such, are hard to shift. Nonetheless, if we are serious about progressing knowledge and understanding about the complex relationships between research, policy and practice, we need far more empirical submissions that explicitly move beyond disciplinary boundaries and policy silos. To that end, we are keen to invite submissions that: (i) take an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach to mapping what is known about the relationship between evidence, policy and practice; (ii) present findings from research designed to provide insights into how knowledge is used in policy and practice through comparison between cases (whether naturally occurring or experimentally 'created'); or (iii) use a defined method to review concepts of knowledge use, or the impact

of knowledge exchange initiatives. Regardless of field of study or knowledge use hue (knowledge transfer/translation/exchange/mobilisation; implementation science; research impact), we encourage authors to clearly state how their work contributes to the interdisciplinary field of 'knowledge about knowledge use'. Building on what others have done is the hallmark of scientific inquiry, and the interdisciplinary field of knowledge use is no different in this respect. For *Evidence & Policy* to substantively inform research and practice, we need to prioritise research and debate that demonstrably develops this interdisciplinary field and moves our understanding forward.

Turning, now, to this issue, we have two separate contributions (opening and closing the issue) that report on efforts to improve the translation of evidence into policy; a common endeavour for many of us involved in this journal. In the context of increasing pressures on researchers to try to achieve policy impact for individual studies (the desirability of which is challenged elsewhere in this issue), it is pleasing to note that both contributions focus on the translation and utilisation of a classic form of evidence synthesis: the systematic review.

First, drawing on an interview-based study of policy relevant systematic reviews (with health relevance), Oliver and colleagues find that no particular approach to systematic reviews is uniquely helpful to policy audiences. Rather, they conclude that the policy utility of reviews emanates from 'mutual engagement across the research-policy interface' that enables reviewers to identify different viewpoints and values and to shape review questions accordingly. Taking a rather different starting point, the *practice* contribution to this issue seeks to provide advice for those whose aim is to translate and summarise existing systematic review findings for healthcare policy and practice decision-makers. Building on previous guidance, Synnot and colleagues tried to implement and evaluate a new means of concisely and effectively communicating the results of Cochrane reviews. These *Evidence Bulletins* included explicit statements about the intended audiences and potential uses, and set out information about the setting, participants and interventions in the included reviews, as well as providing narrative descriptions of the key results. As an intervention that was broadly well received by the target audience, this paper provides insights that are likely to be of interest to anyone seeking to communicate research-based information to decision-making audiences. Nonetheless, the authors reflect that their evaluation feedback suggests summaries could be even more effective if more specifically tailored for different

audience types and suggest that, where resources and time allow, this might usefully be achieved through stakeholder engagement (as Oliver et al's research paper also suggested).

For those of us committed to the idea that research evidence could (and should) play a more important and useful role in decision-making, it can be easy to focus almost exclusively on improving the various ways in which we construct, translate and promote research to non-academic audiences. Yet three other articles in this issue highlight the need to pause and reflect on the desirability, practicality and unintended consequences of such efforts. Mendel's *debate* piece challenges the idea that evidence emanating from 'trials' is necessarily of sufficiently good quality to warrant policy influence, noting that positive policy trial findings have a substantial chance of being wrong. Reflecting on this, Mendel argues that is important for anyone either considering targeting evidence at decision-making audiences or using evidence in decision-making themselves to pay close attention to the details of research design, methodology and analysis. The paper goes on to give two examples of trials that appear to have informed policy decisions in the UK for which the full details have not been disclosed, even when requested. Mendel argues that it is not appropriate to class policy based on research work which is not open to public scrutiny as 'evidence-based'.

In another context, Vallgård argues that her analysis of a Danish decision to ban trans-fatty acids suggests that, although this policy directly reflected researchers' *advice*, it did not necessarily reflect the available research *evidence*. Rather, Vallgård argues, the researchers who actively engaged with Danish policymakers on this issue translated their results in ways that confirmed their pre-understanding and political preferences (though, we should note, that this account is disputed by some of the researchers concerned, as their accompanying commentary piece sets out). Such analysis calls attention to the important distinction between expert- and evidence- informed decision-making (a distinction which is often lacking in incentive structures designed to promote the use of evidence in policy).

In an entirely different context, and for different reasons again, Stewart and colleagues' paper further highlight the potential pitfalls of efforts to encourage the use of evidence in policymaking. Reflecting on South African efforts to produce and commission high quality evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of different social programmes and policies (in a

context in which decision-makers were all too aware of the limitations of existing evidence), Stewart and colleagues identified a piecemeal system involving multiple donors. Yet, within this research-policy landscape, they also identified dense clusters of activity, raising concerns about potential duplication of efforts. Stewart and colleagues conclude that the existence of too many capacity-building programmes can pose risks to system sustainability, especially where initiatives are not owned by within-country decision-makers and evidence is sourced from elsewhere. This paper also highlights the networks of multiple actors who contribute to policymaking and the inevitably political nature of decisions, both of which feature in the remaining contributions to this issue.

Geddes and colleagues' analysis of the interaction between research communities and parliamentary officers in the UK is one of several pieces in this issue to explicitly discuss the political nature of policymaking, noting that academic research often has to compete with other forms of 'evidence', such as the work of think tanks, government reports and public submissions. While this may seem obvious to anyone who has directly engaged in policy debates, it is important to acknowledge that Geddes and colleagues' findings also suggest many academics continue to have a poor understanding of how Parliament works or of the varying knowledge requirements of different types of parliamentary actors.

A rather different study by Wyndham-West and colleagues, exploring the roll-out of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccine in Canada, similarly calls attention to the politically contested, multi-stakeholder and dynamic nature of policymaking. In this paper, however, even greater emphasis is placed on networks of external stakeholders and their role in influencing political and policy 'sensemaking,' with the authors concluding that it is 'difficult to imagine how governments are able to steer policy agendas or to procure policy change in ways that do not reflect and advance private interests.' Echoing aspects of Vallgård's analysis of researchers (see above), Wyndham-West and colleagues argue that policymakers fill information gaps by drawing on their own belief systems. As a consequence, in this case study, policymakers mistakenly assumed that the wider public would share their views about the vaccine and then found it difficult to understand the low vaccine uptake rates. This highlights the importance of improving our empirical efforts to understand public

opinion and to incorporate this kind of publicly oriented evidence into broader efforts to improve the use of research evidence in policymaking.

This brings us to the final research paper, which reports on an innovative approach to studying public reactions to policy developments. The Right Here, Right Now pilot study, conducted by Naven and colleagues in Scotland, involved augmenting traditional survey tools with online and mobile phone technologies to rapidly generate near-real-time data. The results suggest that participants valued the opportunity to be given a voice in decision-making but wanted a clearer sense of how their views were being used and by whom, underlining the crucial roles that transparency and dialogue play in the construction and translation of research.

Whether you work in a single field in one main role, or across a number of fields with multiple overlapping roles (researcher, practitioner, service user, policy maker), we hope that this issue of *Evidence & Policy* improves your understanding of how knowledge is used to inform policy and practice. We welcome feedback on the focus, content, and presentation of *Evidence & Policy*. Our email addresses are at the top of this editorial - we look forward to hearing from you.